Program Reviews

Guidance on Writing Rationales

ra-tion-ale

(noun) a set of reasons or a logical basis for a course of action or a particular belief. *Synonyms:* reason(s), reasoning, thinking, logic, grounds, sense

- Clear
- Specific
- Focused

Being clear, specific, and focused sound simplistic, but these characteristics capture the essence of a good rationale. This document will help outline some approaches to writing a program review rationale so it clearly communicates the status of a program, evidence to support this assertion, and next steps for program improvement.

When communicating to a broad audience, clarity is often a challenge. Acronyms, generalizations, or disorganization can create vagueness or confusion. While it is appropriate to list particular programs, strategies, standards, reports and assessments in a list of evidence; it is critical that these be clearly connected and explained in the rationale.

Example: a math program called WAM might be an effective tool that successfully integrates math and literacy, but it is likely this is an unfamiliar acronym for many who read the rationale. So to be clear, the rationale might include this sort of piece to add clarity.

[Writing: Curriculum and Instruction: Aligned and Rigorous Curriculum] The math department has adopted WAM (Writing and Math), a teaching strategy that uses writing as a way to explain mathematical procedures and thinking. Students reflect on their math learning logs both individually and in learning pairs to reflect and self- and peer-assess. In the program, students return to their logs, gauge progress over time, and make two formal reports of their learning throughout the course. Examples of reports (e.g., videos, PowerPoint presentations, student interviews, blogs, VoiceThread) are included in students' communication portfolios.

What works: This demonstrator encourages an examination of alignment and specifically addresses strands of literacy across content areas. This one description in the rationale happens to cover and explain several aspects of the demonstrator, but also other demonstrators within Curriculum and Instruction as well as other standards. This description perhaps altered a bit if necessary, could be placed within several rationales. The rationale also shows an understanding of the strands of literacy which include more than writing, but also speaking and listening.

What could be improved: Taking a look at the distinguished characteristics for next steps is a powerful way to clearly show understanding of where a program truly is. For instance, much of this rationale has students leading the way and planning their own learning. That is very much in the distinguished category, but there are areas that are weaker. Maybe they realize that while this is a great program that is helping them truly integrate communication skills across contents and include students as leaders of their learning, it may not be addressing meaningful work across content areas (Curriculum & Instruction: Aligned and Rigorous Curriculum, demonstrator 2b). Perhaps they choose to focus on this area for next steps.

Example: Students at this middle school have varied and rich arts and humanities experiences. Evidence can be found of school plays, recitals, exhibits, art fairs and more. The rationale paints with a broad stroke, but doesn't capitalize on their integrated arts program.

[Arts and Humanities: Student Performance] Students in our middle school demonstrate mastery art skills in performances and exhibits. Techniques for demonstrating student creations, performances and responses to the arts is evident in lesson plans, art fairs, concerts, exhibits, and performances. Students and teachers use the same rubric to determine proficiency. Students use domain-specific vocabulary to reflect on their work as well as responding to peers' work.

What works: This school reports many opportunities for students to experience and respond to the arts. They share vocabulary that makes it clear they have placed priority here and time is dedicated to the arts.

What could be improved: In this rationale, what is most desired is missing. Without specific details, it would be difficult to duplicate from year to year or from school to school. This rationale states that techniques were included in lesson plans, art fairs, concerts, exhibits, and performances, but it isn't clear how these actually accomplish the goal of student engagement. If it included specific events, lessons, performances that exemplified the demonstrator, it would be a stronger rationale.

The advantage of being specific is that others can clearly understand references, eliminating ambiguity. A good program review gives a school and district a picture of areas of strength and growth. Strengths and successes can also be highlighted and shared with ease when details are named explicitly. There is a need each year for reflection and reminding. The Program Review can be a place to turn for this growth exercise. Of course it is important for those involved in the programs to revisit, it is also essential for new faculty members to have points of reference. A good rationale can give them the snapshot they need to see the various programs in the school as well as specific targets, programs, strategies, practices, etc. that are used in that school.

Example: In an Arts & Humanities rationale under Professional Development: Opportunity, the evidence lists consists of two summer programs at different universities and one teacher-led professional learning opportunity in: the fall. Other schools are always looking for successful professional learning and could benefit from specific topics, locations, and applications.

[Arts & Humanities: Professional Development: Opportunity] During the summer a fine arts PD is available at a local university. The Band, Choir and Drama teachers attended the summer event. During the course of the fall semester, those teachers are given a

monthly time to collaborate. They have developed a plan to teach the rest of the faculty ways to incorporate arts and humanities in their disciplines. Professionals in the field regularly attend local conferences and host workshops that anyone can attend.

What works: It is clear that there is an emphasis on arts and humanities and this program is valued in this school and district. The fact that three teachers are funded to attend summer workshops is testimony to that as well as the time afforded those teachers to collaborate. They are also showing leadership by providing learning for the rest of the faculty.

What could be improved: While they have given enough information to warrant some success for this demonstrator, there are few specifics. A short description of the types of learning they are exposed to during the summer would be beneficial. Attending a conference doesn't necessarily equal learning. Some evidence of what was learned and brought back, how it was included in lessons and instruction could show more clearly. Also, knowing what kinds of experiences they arranged for the rest of the faculty would be useful. The presentation and materials they used as well as follow up could help the reader better picture this process and success. Knowing which professionals they are referencing could also frame the thinking around this demonstrator. While they rated themselves Proficient, it isn't conclusive. More explicit discussion of the events and process could help erase what is unclear as well as assist others who wish to apply to their programs.

The best rationales have enough information to give a clear idea of the day to day implementation of the program. To accomplish this goal in a reasonable length, there are some things to consider.

- Appositives: this short phrase is used to help describe or clarify. Usually an appositive can replace an entire sentence and adds clarity.
 - o In the math department, a content that has difficulty integrating literacy strands, ...
 - o Dr. Hemingway, a former Broadway actor turned community volunteer, ...
 - o RAFT, one of the main organizers students use for writing, ...
- Incorporating the language of the rubric rather than restating. Restating a demonstrator or characteristic doesn't move the rationale forward, but using the language of the rubric can help clearly connect the evidence.
 - [Restatement] This demonstrator received a distinguished rating because the evidence supports that students are using communications portfolios to demonstrate novel, new and worthwhile ideas while elaborating and refining those ideas to maximize creative efforts and effectively communicate both locally and globally.
 - This sentence from the rationale suggests the program is distinguished in this area, but has no evidence or anything supporting the assertion. Distinguished indicates a level of excellence and that requires explanation and examples.
 - [Incorporating language] Students have taken ownership in their communications portfolios. Throughout the district and within the school, student portfolios are an integral part of instruction. Students collect their writing, reflections, videos, feedback, presentations, etc. and use these to provide evidence of their growth. At the end of each grade level, students will present their personal progress to a panel. Students are to discuss the plan they have created for their learning and evidence as to why they created this plan, feedback they have received and conversations they've had with teachers and peers, and evidence of real world connections. Many students' final presentation is grounded in project-based learning which demonstrate new and worthwhile ideas.

- Combine characteristics. Organizing the rationale by the characteristics in the rationale is an
 acceptable way to approach rationale writing. However, it may be more efficient to combine
 those characteristics. An idea that some schools use is to place the letter of the characteristic
 inside the paragraphs.
 - Opportunities] Two Physical Education and Health teacher leaders from the district created a *Move Kentucky* program whose focus is on awareness, education and opportunity. Based on the student and faculty health (c) data they collected during (d) district allocated release time, they crafted a plan to increase movement within the school day. Based on their (c) research, they developed a plan tailored to a school environment. These teacher leaders presented their plan to the school board, and when it was approved, they set the project into motion. First they met with departments to offer a professional learning opportunity on health and wellness and (a) how to increase movement within the classroom. They wrote a goal that was included in the (a) CSIP and communicated to the faculty.
 - This part of the rationale shows how several characteristics can be combined within a paragraph.

A rationale that is clear, specific, and focused is not only a way for reviewers to assess various programs, but more importantly for the school and district to identify best practices to share within the district and/or state and to identify areas of growth so programs can improve. Those types of rationales also help create continuity from year to year as new faculty and administration join schools. Rationales are the key for capturing a snapshot of a program and moving forward.